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Antifa—Background

“Antifa” Gains Prominence in the Public Realm

Some Americans describe themselves and their ideological outlooks as “antifa,” shorthand for “antifascist.” As “antifa” suggests, followers focus on countering the views of people they deem fascist or white supremacist. They see themselves as part of a protest tradition that arcs back to opposition groups in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy prior to World War II. A portion of antifa movement members are willing to commit crimes to promote their beliefs. Antifa groups in the United States have gained prominence following violent clashes between white supremacists and their opponents in Charlottesville, VA, on August 12, 2017. Also in 2017, according to news reports, antifa protesters scuffled with people they opposed at public protests in locations such as Portland, OR, and Berkeley, CA.

The U.S. antifa movement appears to be decentralized, consisting of independent, radical, like-minded groups and individuals. Its tenets can dovetail with the principles of anarchism, socialism, and communism. Adherents do not necessarily just hold these opinions, however. Among many other things, they may also support environmentalism, the rights of indigenous populations, and gay rights. Antifa activism traces its U.S. roots back to antiracists who mobilized in the 1980s. Some of these antiracists were willing to break the law when opposing the activities of people like racist skinheads, members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and neo-Nazis.

For at least two reasons, contemporary U.S. antifa adherents likely don’t share a list of enemies. First, the movement lacks a unifying organizational structure or detailed ideology that might shape such a list. Local groups do not have to listen to each other’s pronouncements and might aim their animus at specific enemies. Second, “fascism” is notoriously difficult to define. Thus, particular antifa groups may oppose different things based on how they identify who or what is fascist.

Antifa Purpose and Tactics

Much antifa activity involves nonviolent protest such as hanging posters, delivering speeches, and marching. As a core purpose, antifa groups track and react to the activities of individuals or groups they see as advocating fascist views, such as neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, white supremacists, and white nationalists. Antifa adherents believe that civil liberties protections provide safe harbor to ideas and people bent on harming vulnerable populations in the United States. Thus, antifa followers tend not to accept that the conventional capacities of American society will thwart the rise of fascist movements. They lack faith in the ability of federal, state, or local governments to properly investigate or prosecute fascists who break the law, especially during shows of force at public marches. This

lack of faith can result in a willingness to engage in criminality—taking the law into their own hands—when confronting their foes or expressing their own ideas.

While few concrete antifa principles exist, U.S. supporters have articulated four “obligations” for all groups. According to a movement text, antifa groups must (1) track the activity of fascist groups, (2) oppose their public organizing, (3) support antifascist allies attacked by fascists or arrested by police, and (4) not cooperate with law enforcement.

When it has occurred, interpersonal violence during demonstrations has ranged from street fights involving groups to “Nazi-punching,” which, as the term suggests, involves an individual assaulting a perceived enemy. A September 2017 incident in the Seattle, WA, area reportedly began with people using antifa-linked social media accounts to post photographs of a man sporting a swastika armband around town. Someone presumably following the social media posts caught up to him and knocked him out with a blow to the head. According to police, the victim refused medical treatment and declined to report the crime. Antifa followers have also caused property damage at protests. When they harm property or brawl with opponents, antifa members tend to rationalize such crimes either as defensive reactions to the aggressions of their foes or as part of their own need to defend society from fascism. In some instances, antifa followers show up at protests prepared for physical skirmishes, carrying weapons as well as gear such as shields and helmets.

Antifa movement literature emphasizes a number of ways to “take action.” The same movement source that describes antifa “obligations” urges followers to pursue some activities that appear to be fairly ordinary, lawful protest fare, as well as other activities that seem more confrontational. Among its suggestions, it encourages adherents to do the following:

- Develop an online/social media presence to promote antifa views and recruit.
- Monitor the activities of groups such as the KKK, racist skinheads, and neo-Nazis, as well as people who describe themselves as white nationalists, among others.
- Throw fundraisers and set up promotional tables at a variety of public events to recruit new members.
- Join rallies held by like-minded organizations opposing people or groups that antifa supporters dub fascist. Antifa groups also stage their own counter-demonstrations opposing fascist rallies.
- Compel outside organizations hosting speakers or rallies with a fascist bent to cancel such events. Protest in these instances can involve obstructing access to venues and the intense lobbying of hosts. This sort of activity has

been called “no platforming” (i.e., denying opponents a public platform). Those advocating free speech have especially criticized these efforts.

- Remove or deface the publicly posted flyers of perceived enemies.
- Publicize information about perceived enemies. This can include group affiliations (such as the KKK), home addresses, photographs, phone numbers, social media profiles, and their employers. This kind of activity, often involving lawful online research, is called doxxing. In some instances, innocent persons (cases of mistaken identity) may be targeted and have their lives disrupted by doxxing, although antifa activists engaged in this line of work purport to avoid such outcomes.
- Develop self-defense training regimens involving martial arts and the legal limits governing self-defense items such as pepper spray, retractable clubs, and firearms. Where and how antifa followers use such training and equipment likely depends partly on the threat posed by opponents at rallies or the risk of arrest and criminal conviction.

Are Antifa Members Domestic Terrorists?

According to news reports, since 2016 counterterrorism experts at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, the Bureau) have been increasingly concerned about violence perpetrated by antifa supporters at public rallies where they confront their ideological opponents. Presumably, the Bureau would investigate antifa followers suspected of criminal activity as domestic terrorists, categorizing them as a type of anarchist extremist. FBI Director Christopher Wray has suggested as much, noting that the Bureau has opened counterterrorism investigations into people committing crimes in the name of antifa beliefs. In congressional testimony in November 2017, he said that the FBI was pursuing “a number of what we would call anarchist extremist investigations, where we have properly predicated subjects [people] who are motivated to commit violent criminal activity on kind of an antifa ideology. So we have a number of active investigations in that space, all around the country.” In public remarks in January 2018, Thomas E. Brzozowski, the Department of Justice’s Counsel for Domestic Terrorism Matters, reiterated Wray’s comments. The FBI has not made public additional information about its antifa-related cases.

FBI Terrorism Investigations. The FBI is the lead agency for federal terrorism investigations (28 C.F.R. 0.85(l)). Its top priority is protecting the United States from terrorist attack. The FBI relies on the following definition of domestic terrorism: “acts of violence that [violate] the criminal laws of the United States or any state, committed by individuals or groups without any foreign direction, and appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, or influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.” The definition says nothing about the specific ideological motivations of domestic terrorists. In recent years, the FBI and the Department of Justice have delineated a number of ideologies that domestic terrorists use to justify their crimes. Domestic terrorists/extremists

commit crimes in the name of anarchism (likely including antifa), animal rights, environmental rights, white supremacy, antigovernment beliefs (such as those that inspire “sovereign citizens” and unauthorized militias), black separatism, and beliefs tied to abortion. In 2017, the FBI reportedly also created the concept of “black identity extremism” (BIE). It is unclear how BIE fits in with the rest of these categories. (For more, see CRS Report, CRS Report R44921, *Domestic Terrorism: An Overview*; and CRS In Focus IFI0769, *FBI Categorization of Domestic Terrorism*.)

Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) led by the FBI coordinate federal counterterrorism investigations—including those involving crimes perpetrated by antifa supporters. The more than 100 JTTFs in FBI field divisions across the country bring together federal, state, and local participants. JTTFs are multiagency teams of investigators, analysts, linguists, and other specialists who investigate terrorism and terrorism-related crimes. The FBI safeguards against cases solely focused on constitutionally protected activities. Formal FBI investigative activity has to be conducted, at the very least, for an authorized national security, criminal, or foreign intelligence collection purpose and in pursuit of a clearly defined objective. Investigative activity may not solely monitor the exercise of First Amendment rights.

Historical Context

Arguably, antifascism goes back to the origins of fascism in interwar Italy and Germany. American antiracist groups—such as Anti-Racist Action (ARA)—that took up the ideology in the late 1980s embraced the international movement’s provocative and occasionally criminal—even violent—tactics. In 2013, activists rebranded ARA into the Torch Network, a loose coalition of about a dozen antifa groups. Founded in 2007, The Rose City Antifa (RCA) in Portland, OR, is the oldest U.S. group to use “antifa” in its moniker. RCA joined the Torch Network in 2016. It had been part of ARA between 2007 and 2013.

Violence by U.S. antifa members is not new. For example, in 2012 antiracists linked to ARA attacked a meeting of the Illinois European Heritage Association, consisting of white supremacists from the National Socialist Movement and people from other groups. Brandishing items such as hammers, baseball bats, and police batons, the attackers entered a Chicago-area restaurant and assaulted meeting attendees. Five attackers received prison sentences for their roles in the melee.

It appears the contemporary movement may be growing as antifa groups recruit followers on fears that fascism is making new inroads in the United States. Such expansion and the rising number of run-ins between antifa supporters and their opponents at public rallies raise the public profile of antifascism in the United States.

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